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ABSTRACT

Previous research investigating the relationship between body build and personality stereotypes found that the mesomorphic build was attributed positive qualities while the endomorph and ectomorph were assigned negative qualities by both males and females. More recent research has revealed a potential shift in body build preferences as standards of physical attractiveness. To examine the degree of congruence between the male and female adolescent's preference for body build of self and a significant other, 93 entering college freshmen were shown silhouettes of male and female somatotypes and asked to pick which one they would most prefer to look like and would most prefer a significant other to look like. Subjects were then asked to attribute behavioral and personality characteristics to one of the silhouettes. Chi-Square analyses were performed which revealed that males preferred to look mesomorphic and that females preferred mesomorphic looking males. Contrary to earlier research, females exhibited a strong personal preference for the ectomorphic look and males preferred ectomorphic looking females. Additional data revealed that the positive stereotype once attributed almost exclusively to the mesomorphic body-build is generalizing to the ectomorphic build for females. The data describe an emerging emphasis on thinness as a standard of attractiveness, especially for females. (Author/NB)

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Adolescent Attractiveness Standards for Self and Significant Other

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Presented to the Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Psychological Association, New Orleans, LA, April 1987.

ABSTRACT

Entering college freshmen were shown silhouettes of male and female somatotypes and asked to pick which one they would most prefer to look like, and would most prefer a significant other to look like. Subjects were then asked to attribute behavioral and personality characteristics to one of the silhouettes. Chi-Square analyses were performed, and revealed that males preferred to look mesomorphic, and females preferred mesomorphic looking males. Contrary to earlier research, females exhibited a strong personal preference for the ectomorphic look, and males preferred ectomorphic looking females. Additional data revealed that the positive stereotype once attributed almost exclusively to the mesomorphic body-build is generalizing to the ectomorphic build for females. The data describe an emerging emphasis on thinness as a standard of attractiveness, especially for females.

INTRODUCTION

Psychologists have long been fascinated with the relationship between appearance and behavioral characteristics. The body functions as a social stimulus that elicits certain expectations from other members of the social arena. The expectations are a reflection of the culture's standards of attractiveness. Thus, culture gives meaning to the physical characteristics that one possesses. Since culture and cultural standards of attractiveness are constantly changing, it is important to occasionally replicate the early research on body-build behavior relationships.

Previous research investigating the relationship between body-build and personality stereotypes has found that the mesomorphic build is attributed positive qualities while the endomorph and ectomorph are assigned negative qualities by both males (Lerner, 1969; Lerner, 1972) and females (Staffieri, 1972). However, when asked about personal preferences for body-build, males almost unanimously preferred the mesomorphic look along with two-thirds of the females. The interesting point is that one-third of the females surveyed in the 1960's preferred the ectomorphic body-build. At least some of the females in this cohort were sensitive to cultural standards of attractiveness that stressed greater thinness than had been the norm in the past.

More recent research has revealed a potential shift in body-build preferences as standards of physical attractiveness. Gascaly & Borges (1979) found that both

mesomorphic and ectomorphic body-builds were attributed favorable attributes by college students. Similarly, Guy, Rankin, & Norvell (1980) found that mesomorphs were rated as highly masculine and ectomorphs were judged as feminine. In general, the assignment of favorable personality characteristics that was true of earlier studies are now attributing many of these characteristics to the ectomorphic build.

The last ten years has witnessed a shift in standards of physical attractiveness towards greater thinness. Other researchers note that female thinness is associated with greater self-control (Garner, Garfinkel, & Olmsted, 1983), popularity (Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971), and attractiveness (Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980). The tendency for our culture to equate thinness with success and beauty has resulted in the development of unrealistic attitudes towards eating and health related behaviors among young adolescents and adults. Thus, there seems to be an evolutionary trend towards greater thinness as a standard of attractiveness, especially for females.

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the degree of congruence between the male and female adolescent's preference for body-build of self and a significant other. A secondary goal was to investigate similarities and differences in the attribution of behavioral and personality characteristics to same and opposite-sex silhouettes. The attribution of personality characteristics to body-builds may

illustrate qualitative changes in cultural standards of attractiveness.

METHOD

Subjects. All of the subjects participating in this study were freshmen at a small midwestern university enrolled in an introductory psychology course. Forty-seven of the subjects were males and 46 were females. This volunteer sample was homogeneous with respect to age and the parent's social economic status. All of the subjects received extra points in their class for their participation.

Adjectives. A list of 44 behavioral and personality descriptors was derived from those employed by Lerner (1972) and Staffieri (1972). These descriptors covered a wide range of behaviors that have been found to be systematically attributed to various body-types in previous research.

Silhouettes. The silhouettes were also adapted from Lerner and Staffieri. These stimuli were constructed so that there were three female silhouettes on one display poster and three male silhouettes on another. All six of the silhouettes were black on a white background and were the same size. The body curvature represented extreme endomorphy, mesomorphy, and ectomorphy.

Procedure. Each subject was seen individually. Roughly half of the male subjects were asked to assign adjectives to either the male silhouettes (n=26) or to the female silhouettes (n=21). Similarly, about half of the female subjects assigned adjectives to either male (n=25) or female (n=21) silhouettes.

After assigning adjectives to the silhouettes, each subject was shown the same-sex silhouettes and asked to indicate which they most preferred to look like. This was employed as the measure of attractiveness standard for the self. Next, each subject was shown the opposite-sex silhouettes and asked to indicate which they would most like a significant other to look like. This response was employed as the ideal attractiveness standard for the significant other.

Chi-Square analyses were performed to determine if the attribution of personality stereotypes to body-builds were different than would have been expected by chance. These results are presented in Tables 1-4. These analyses were also performed on the personal preference and preference for a significant other data to ascertain the liklihood that self and other preferences were linked to any one particular body build. These results are presented in Table 5.

CONCLUSIONS

The results reveal a general pattern of attributions and personal preferences that support an interpretation that cultural standards of attractiveness are changing. The change is in the direction of greater thinness and is especially influential for women. This pattern is evident when the data concerning the assignment of adjectives and preferences for self and significant other are examined.

Assignment of Adjectives. In general, there was a tendency for both males and females to rate the ectomorphic silhouettes as favorably as the mesomorphic figures. In conjunction with

this pattern of positive attribution to ectomorphic body-builds, there was a pattern of negative attribution to endomorphic body-builds. The endomorphic body build continues to be viewed negatively by individuals and society. However, when asked to assign adjectives to opposite-sex silhouettes the typical stereotypic pattern is absent or weakened. In other words, the stereotypes that males and females hold regarding body-build behavior relations are stronger for the same-sex than for the opposite sex.

Preference for Self and Other. There appears to be a trend towards increased thinness as a standard of attractiveness for females when the results of this study are compared to earlier work. Females overwhelmingly prefer the thin look of the ectomorph, and males strongly prefer thin looking females for a significant other. This contrasts strongly with earlies research in which the large majority of females preferred the mesomorphic body-build. Validation of the desire for a thinner body build is apparently provided by males, who prefer an ideal significant other who is quite thin.

Males still prefer the traditional athletic look of the mesomorph, and this body-build is most preferred by females for a significant other. The cultural emphasis on thinness as an indicator of success and beauty is apparently not as strong for males as it is for females. It remains to be seen if the coupling of success, popularity, and attractiveness will lead to a similar shift for males. There is, however, a growing literature on the incidence of eating disorders among males.

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Table 1
Frequency of Adjective Assignment to Male Silhouettes by Male Subjects.

Adjectives	Silhouettes Endo	Meso	Ecto	Chi-Square
Leader	0	22	4	31.67***
Athlete	0	20	6	24.30***
Eat the Least	0	0	26	51.98***
Drink the Most	21	5	0	27.76***
Not Smoke	1	17	8	14.84***
Eat the Most	24	1	1	40.66***
Selfish	14	9	3	6.99*
Mentally Healthy	0	18	8	18.76***
Endure Pain	3	19	4	18.53***
Best Friend	9	7	10	.53
Quiet	6	0	20	24.30***
Fight	1	24	1	40.69***
Kind	15	1	10	11.61**
Cheat	4	17	5	12.07**
Clean	0	12	14	13.23**
Worry	13	0	13	12.99**
Lot of Friends	2	18	6	15.99***
Nervous	9	0	17	16.68***
Happy	7	12	7	1.92
Help Others	9	6	11	1.46
Polite	3	5	18	15.30***
Argue	4	17	5	12.07**
Teased	25	0	1	46.20***
Lonely	18	0	8	18.75***
Sick	7	0	19	21.30***
Weak	2	0	24	40.90***
Lazy	25	0	1	46.20***
Healthy	0	23	3	36.05***
Lie	5	15	6	6.99*
Sneaky	2	11	13	7.92*
Sloppy	22	3	1	30.98***
Brave	0	23	3	36.05***
Tease Others	0	23	3	36.05***
Naughty	3	13	10	6.47*
Good Looking	0	24	2	40.59***
Mean	2	18	6	15.99***
Afraid	5	0	21	27.75***
Ugly	22	1	3	30.98***
Sad	17	0	9	16.68***
Smart	3	3	20	22.83***
Dirty	19	6	1	19.92***
Tired	20	1	5	23.13***
Neat	0	13	13	12.99**

Chi-Square calculated with Cells - 1 degrees of freedom (DF=2). Critical values in parentheses.
* p<.05 (5.99), ** p<.01 (9.21), *** p<.001 (13.82)

Table 2
Frequency of Adjective Assignment to Female Silhouettes by Male Subjects.

Adjectives	Silhouettes Endo	Meso	Ecto	Chi-Square
Leader	0	18	3	26.56***
Athlete	0	16	5	19.14***
Eat the Least	1	1	19	30.85***
Drink the most	11	6	4	3.71
Not Smoke	4	9	8	1.99
Eat the Most	20	0	1	36.28***
Selfish	5	7	9	1.14
Mentally Healthy	5	7	9	1.14
Endure Pain	1	17	3	21.70***
Best Friend	7	5	9	1.14
Quiet	11	1	9	8.00*
Fight	1	17	3	21.72***
Kind	15	0	6	16.28***
Cheat	3	10	8	3.71
Clean	2	2	17	21.43***
Worry	16	0	5	19.14***
Lot of Friends	2	9	10	5.43
Nervous	12	4	5	5.43
Happy	2	5	14	11.14**
Help Others	12	3	6	6.00*
Polite	12	7	2	7.14*
Argue	2	13	6	8.85*
Teased	18	3	0	26.58***
Lonely	16	3	2	17.43***
Sick	9	1	11	8.00*
Weak	3	0	18	26.56***
Lazy	18	1	2	25.99***
Healthy	0	13	8	12.28**
Lie	4	11	6	3.70
Sneaky	3	8	10	3.71
Sloppy	15	4	2	13.99***
Brave	1	19	1	30.86***
Tease Others	0	11	10	10.56**
Naughty	0	7	14	14.00***
Good Looking	0	6	15	16.28***
Mean	3	15	3	13.71***
Afraid	10	1	10	7.71*
Ugly	17	2	2	15.14***
Sad	17	2	2	15.14***
Smart	6	5	10	2.00
Dirty	10	8	3	3.72
Tired	16	3	2	17.43***
Neat	3	7	11	4.58

Chi-Square calculated with Cells - 1 degrees of freedom (DF=2). Critical values in parentheses.
* p<.05 (5.99), ** p<.01 (9.21), *** p<.001 (13.82)

Table 3

Frequency of Adjective Assignment to Female Silhouettes by Female Subjects.

Adjectives	Silhouettes Endo	Meso	Ecto	Chi-Square
Leader	1	10	10	7.70*
Athlete	0	12	9	11.14**
Eat the Least	0	1	20	36.28***
Drink the most	13	5	3	7.99*
Not Smoke	3	9	9	3.42
Eat the Most	20	0	1	36.28***
Selfish	10	3	8	3.71
Mentally Healthy	1	12	8	8.85*
Endure Pain	2	15	4	10.99**
Best Friend	6	6	9	.85
Quiet	10	3	8	3.71
Fight	3	17	1	21.72***
Kind	11	5	5	3.43
Cheat	3	6	12	5.99*
Clean	0	8	13	12.28**
Worry	12	1	8	8.85*
Lot of Friends	1	9	11	8.00*
Nervous	11	1	9	8.00*
Happy	7	5	9	1.14
Help Others	8	8	5	.85
Polite	6	9	6	.85
Argue	3	7	11	4.58
Teased	21	0	0	42.00***
Lonely	18	0	3	26.58***
Sick	10	3	8	3.72
Weak	10	0	11	10.56**
Lazy	15	4	2	13.99***
Healthy	0	13	8	12.28**
Lie	6	13	2	8.85*
Sneaky	1	6	14	12.28**
Sloppy	14	4	3	10.56**
Brave	0	16	5	19.14***
Tease Others	1	8	12	8.85*
Naughty	2	9	10	5.42
Good Looking	1	6	14	12.28**
Mean	3	10	8	3.71
Afraid	12	2	7	7.14*
Ugly	17	2	2	18.71***
Sad	15	2	4	13.99***
Smart	3	12	6	17.29***
Dirty	10	4	7	2.58
Tired	17	2	2	18.71***
Neat	1	6	14	12.28**

Chi-Square calculated with Cells - 1 degrees of freedom (DF=2). Critical values in parentheses.
* p<.05 (5.99), ** p<.01 (9.21), *** p<.001 (13.82)

Table 4
Frequency of Adjective Assignment to Male Silhouettes by Female Subjects.

Adjectives	Silhouettes Endo	Meso	Ecto	Chi-Square
Leader	1	18	6	18.31***
Athlete	0	19	6	22.62***
Eat the Least	0	0	25	49.96***
Drink the most	20	5	0	25.98***
Not Smoke	2	11	12	7.28*
Eat the Most	25	0	0	49.96***
Selfish	6	13	6	3.29
Mentally Healthy	0	16	9	15.43***
Endure Pain	3	20	2	24.54***
Best Friend	12	6	7	2.49
Quiet	11	1	13	9.91**
Fight	5	19	1	21.43***
Kind	13	2	10	7.75*
Cheat	3	16	6	11.11**
Clean	1	17	7	15.67***
Worry	15	2	8	10.15**
Lot of Friends	3	19	3	20.47***
Nervous	13	0	12	12.55**
Happy	6	9	10	1.04
Help Others	14	3	8	7.27*
Polite	13	4	8	4.87
Argue	4	16	5	10.64**
Teased	23	1	1	38.74***
Lonely	21	0	4	29.85***
Sick	10	0	15	14.00***
Weak	3	1	21	29.07***
Lazy	21	3	1	29.07***
Healthy	1	21	3	29.07***
Lie	6	11	8	1.50
Sneaky	6	8	11	1.50
Sloppy	20	2	3	24.54***
Brave	2	20	3	24.54***
Tease Others	2	19	4	20.78***
Naughty	2	15	8	10.15**
Good Looking	1	19	5	21.42***
Mean	3	16	6	11.12**
Afraid	15	0	10	13.99***
Ugly	23	2	0	38.93***
Sad	15	2	8	10.15**
Smart	5	7	13	4.16
Dirty	20	4	1	25.02***
Tired	15	3	7	8.96*
Neat	1	14	10	10.53**

Chi-Square calculated with Cells - 1 degrees of freedom (DF=2). Critical values in parentheses.
* p<.05 (5.99), ** p<.01 (9.21), *** p<.001 (13.82)

Table 5
Frequency of Personal Preference and Preference for Significant Other for Male and Female Subjects.

Preference	Silhouettes Endo	Meso	Ecto	Chi-Square
Personal Preference				
Males	0	36	11	43.64***
Females	0	8	38	52.46***
Total	0	44	49	
For Significant Other				
Males	0	9	38	50.55***
Females	0	35	11	41.87***
Total	0	44	49	

Chi-Square calculated with Cells - 1 degrees of freedom (DF=2). Critical values in parentheses.
* p<.05 (5.99), ** p<.01 (9.21), *** p<.001 (13.82)